

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease: Questions & Answers

Q. What is rabbit hemorrhagic disease?

A. Rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD) is a highly infectious viral disease of the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*). This is the species from which all U.S. domestic and commercial rabbits are derived. American cottontail rabbits and jackrabbits are not susceptible to infection.

Q. Does this disease affect people?

A. No.

Q. Does RHD affect other animals?

A. It is not known to be harmful to other animals.

Q. What are the clinical signs of RHD?

A. Rabbits die suddenly within 6 to 24 hours of the onset of fever with few clinical signs. Fever may be as high as 105 °F, but often is not detected until rabbits show terminal clinical signs. RHD damages the liver, intestines, and lymphatic tissue and causes terminal blood clots. The death rate ranges from 50 to 100 percent.

Q. Is there a treatment?

A. No.

Q. Is there a vaccine?

A. No vaccine is legally available for use in the United States. Vaccine has been used in parts of the world where the disease occurs in wild rabbits. Vaccination will often reduce the number of rabbits dying from RHD, but will not eradicate the disease. Rabbits vaccinated against the disease may become infected but not show signs of disease, thereby allowing spread of the virus as a carrier.

Q. How is RHD spread?

A. RHD is highly contagious. The large amounts of virus are passed in the droppings of infected rabbits. The virus can then be spread on to the food of healthy rabbits, infecting them. The virus can also be spread by contact with rabbit products, rodents, and contaminated objects, such as cages, feeders, and clothing. Contaminated objects may be a source of spread if not cleaned and disinfected. Infected rabbits that recover may become carriers of the virus. Recovered rabbits can shed virus for at least 4 weeks after recovery.

Q. What precautionary measures can be taken to prevent RHD?

A. To prevent the spread of the disease, breeders should prevent contact between healthy rabbits and infected rabbits and contaminated objects (e.g., cages, feeders, and clothing). Where the health status of a rabbit is unknown it should be kept in mind that healthy appearing rabbits can be in the early stage of disease and later spread the disease. Additionally, recovered rabbits appear healthy but can be carriers and spread the disease to other rabbits.

Owners should be cautious and isolate new rabbits and rabbits returning from shows for at least 5 days. If rabbits were exposed to RHD, isolation may prevent spread of the virus to other rabbits. Clinical disease will usually be noticeable within 48 hours of infection.

Q. How should suspected cases of RHD be reported?

A. Veterinarians and rabbit owners who suspect a rabbit may have RHD should immediately contact State or Federal animal health authorities.

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